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Subregional Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Central Africa

Report of the Secretary-General**

Summary

The present report, submitted in accordance with General Assembly resolution 61/158, provides an overview of the work carried out by the Subregional Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Central Africa and the most significant developments in its operations from September 2006 to August 2007. It describes the changes that have taken place at the Centre, including the change in leadership and strategic direction, and provides details on activities carried out in the areas of capacity-building for Governments in the region, technical cooperation and advisory activities, democracy and peace support, public information and dissemination of documentation, as well as the creation of more innovative partnerships with Governments, subregional organizations, diplomatic missions, civil society organizations and United Nations agencies.

* A/62/150.
** The report is submitted with delay owing to the need to include the most recent information.

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I. Introduction

1. The Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Central Africa was established in 2001 pursuant to General Assembly resolution 54/55 A of 1 December 1999, at the request of Member States that are members of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS). The Centre operates under the auspices of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

2. The mission of the Centre is to contribute to the enhancement of capacities in the promotion and protection of human rights, and to support the creation and/or strengthening of national institutions in addition to ensuring support for institutions of democracy and the creation of a democratic culture and the rule of law in the subregion. The Centre also strives to contribute towards the prevention of conflicts and the promotion of sustainable peace and development.

3. The Centre became fully operational in March 2001. In June 2002, it was officially inaugurated by the High Commissioner for Human Rights. The Centre has entered its sixth year of operations. It is at present composed of three professionals: the Director, the Regional Adviser on Democracy and the Human Rights Officer. An associate expert funded by the Netherlands has been working with the Centre since September 2005. In addition, the Centre hosts a consultant who serves as an adviser for the implementation of the programme under the Action 2 Initiative. The Centre also comprises three regular local staff, including a documentalist.

4. In addition to support from the regular budget, the Centre has continued to benefit from extrabudgetary resources, especially through the trust fund provided by the Government of France for a three-year period (2003-2006). OHCHR provides full assistance for the proper functioning of the Centre in the fulfilment of its mandate.

II. Subregional human rights environment and increasing role of the Centre

5. Human rights and democracy challenges persist in the Central African subregion. While in some countries there is greater space for political freedoms and fundamental liberties and Governments broadly tolerate activities aimed at sensitizing the population about their rights, there are countries in which such liberties are restricted, with Governments controlling all sectors of national activities in violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms proclaimed by the constitution and provided by international instruments.

6. There are countries in the region undergoing various levels of internal and external conflict, which their Governments have used as a pretext for restricting human rights. Although most States in the region have ratified the key human rights treaties and made public pledges to implement them domestically, much still remains to be done in most cases, and only modest progress has been registered in terms of actually transforming these international obligations into domestic law.

7. Discrimination remains a particularly serious concern in the region. Minorities like the Baka Pygmies face discrimination in accessing social, economic and cultural rights, particularly in terms of education, health and housing. Exploitation

of resources is a major issue as communities are being displaced and have to learn how to live in a completely different environment. Torture, child trafficking, slavery and sexual exploitation continue to be reported from some parts of the subregion. Although major efforts have been launched to address these violations, much remains to be done. Some Governments deny the existence of such issues, thus slowing down reforms in these areas.

8. With regard to the institutional framework, a number of Government-led human rights institutions have sprung up in many countries, although their effectiveness has varied from country to country. Most countries have made attempts to create national human rights commissions based on the Principles relating to the status of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights (the Paris Principles), while others have created institutions within the Government machinery (such as departments or ministries) to improve human rights promotion and protection. Some of these institutions have addressed specific human rights cases and trends and have been instrumental in the promotion of human rights. A majority of them have extensive sensitization capacities which have been used properly, but in general they appear to shy away from dealing with sensitive or high-profile cases of violations.

9. Elections have been taking place periodically in most countries of the Central African region and the democratic space generally seems to be expanding, although it is clear that much more needs to be done in this area. Countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo have embraced electoral democracy and gone through what can be qualified as credible national elections, according to an international network of electoral monitors including the United Nations, the International Organization of la Francophonie and the Southern African Development Community. Other countries in the region have undertaken electoral processes that have been perceived as far less credible. Nevertheless, a number of Governments have expressed the need for technical assistance in the area of democracy and have demonstrated a willingness to review electoral codes and democratic processes to ensure inclusion of the majority of the population. Some State-appointed electoral commissions have conducted mass sensitization campaigns and have allowed the participation of civil society and other non-governmental actors in these processes.

10. Some parts of the subregion have a vibrant civil society, a development that has helped open up the political space and encouraged a constructive human rights dialogue. In some countries human rights groups have been actively engaged in human rights monitoring, visiting detention facilities, documenting specific cases of violations and publishing reports aimed at sensitizing the Governments on the need to improve their human rights standards. However, in some places, civil society activists, including human rights workers, have been restricted in their work, and there have even been cases of arrests of leading human rights figures. In other countries, civil society organizations have been threatened with closure. At the same time, the media continue to assert themselves in a subregion where journalists have faced harassment.

11. The Centre's work on these and other challenges in the subregion has been designed to ensure that there exists a concrete and reliable system of responding to the needs of stakeholders such as Governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and also to ensure that the principles of human rights and democracy and

international mechanisms are better known, and that the Centre is able to address human rights issues directly with stakeholders and to identify avenues of collaboration with the Governments and other partners.

12. Following the departure of the Centre's first Director in September 2005, the Centre was for one year without long-term leadership, owing to delays in the recruitment process. On 1 September 2006, the new Director took over the operations of the Centre, embarking on a new direction through the development and adoption of a new strategy (see below).

13. The democracy programme of the Centre also became operational with the arrival of the Regional Adviser on Democracy in September 2006. There had been no such adviser since 2004. In 2007, the new democracy programme focused mainly on contributing to opening and consolidating the democratic space in the subregion to support Governments' initiatives to increase governance accountability and efforts towards durable peace.

III. Activities carried out from September 2006 to August 2007

A. The new strategy of the Centre

14. Following the change in leadership and the subsequent review of the Centre's activities in September 2006, a new three-year strategy for the Centre was adopted, focusing primarily on the areas within the dual democracy and human rights mandate in which the Centre would intervene most effectively within the region. The goals of the new strategy were developed to fit within the overall strategy of OHCHR as contained in the High Commissioner's Plan of Action (A/59/2005/Add.3, annex) and Strategic Management Plan 2006-2007. The strategy document that resulted in this process placed particular emphasis on the need to have results-based interventions that would also increase the Centre's visibility among the States of the Central African subregion, to ensure that all the activities of the Centre were linked to an overall strategic goal and to involve non-governmental actors in a more direct manner in the work of the Centre.

15. On the human rights side of the new strategy, the focus was on strengthening national human rights frameworks and building the capacity of Government ministries with human rights mandates, national human rights institutions, key actors and the general public, particularly in addressing issues such as impunity, discrimination and poverty. Human rights programmes would be developed in areas such as strengthening the human rights capacities of the United Nations country teams; enhancing treaty body reporting through training; monitoring, advising on and advocating for the implementation of ratified human rights treaties; providing more dynamic support to national human rights institutions; and greater involvement in human rights education and training and capacity-building programmes, especially those designed to protect marginalized groups in the subregion.

16. The democracy side of the new strategy laid out similarly critical goals. Programmes targeted in this part of the mandate included direct support to parliaments and the creation of parliamentary committees that focus on human rights; support for the judiciary and rule of law institutions in different countries;

ensuring the entrenchment of national electoral commissions in the constitutions of various Member States in order to ensure the holding of free and fair elections; and direct engagement with and support of credible civil society organizations. Two new issues that had hitherto featured less significantly in the previous work of the Centre were added to the democracy portfolio of the Centre, namely anti-corruption and transitional justice.

17. During the period under review, the Centre shared its new strategy with various interlocutors including members of Governments, civil society organizations, subregional organizations and some United Nations country teams. All counterparts broadly supported this strategy and accepted it as the basis for the Centre's future intervention in the subregion in the areas of human rights and democracy support. The strategy has also been discussed in the media and in other public forums. The need for the Centre's work to be more visible continues to be articulated by various partners and interlocutors, who point to the fact that the Centre was established to develop public awareness of human rights and democratic principles and practices in the Central African countries, in due cooperation with its partners and in support of the strengthening of national capacities of those countries.

18. As the Centre's visibility has risen with the various activities pursuant to its new strategy, so have the requests for assistance from Governments and other players in the subregion, who have been soliciting the Centre to participate in a myriad of programmes and activities in the areas of human rights and democracy and to be a partner in their work. Barely six months after the launch of the strategy, the Centre had received over 200 requests from Governments and various human rights and democracy actors and had begun to receive a large number of visitors interested in following up on its activities. The launching of the Centre's website further significantly enhanced the Centre's visibility (see below). Over 5,300 visits were made to the website by the end of July 2007, within its initial three months of existence.

19. As part of the implementation of the new strategy, and with a view to deepening its understanding of ways in which Governments and other actors in the subregion are dealing with challenges related to human rights and democracy, the Centre has embarked on a programme of visits with high-level officials in different countries (known as "human rights and democracy fortnights"). Under this programme, the Centre hopes to visit a number of countries with the aim of meeting all the human rights/democracy actors and interlocutors, explaining publicly its mandate and recent strategy, meeting with top Government leadership, interacting with the media and carrying out targeted training in human rights and democracy issues. The first such visit took place in Gabon from 8 to 23 April 2007. On that occasion, a delegation of the Centre was received by H.E. Mr. El Hadj Omar Bongo Ondimba, President of the Republic of Gabon, and discussed several issues related to the promotion of human rights and democracy. Similar visits have been planned for Equatorial Guinea, the Central African Republic and the Congo in the coming two years.

B. Human rights activities

20. During the first quarter of 2007, the Centre conceived and implemented a programme aimed at the protection of media freedom and the promotion of the right to information, two themes that had been identified as being of primary concern in the subregion. In February and March, the Centre organized three meetings with media professionals in Cameroon to explore ways of ensuring the enjoyment of the right to information in the country. These sessions started on 20 February 2007 with a meeting with members of the public media, who brainstormed with the Centre on the challenges facing the implementation of this right. A second meeting took place on 14 March and was attended by private media practitioners as well as civil society actors.

21. The Centre organized a joint workshop with both private and public media on 3 April 2007 during which the participants also brainstormed on the best strategies to be adopted to remove obstacles restricting media access to public information. They expressed the hope that restrictions on the freedom of information would be removed, which will create an environment in which the populations in the region will know more about and be able to influence Government decisions and public policies affecting them.

22. During its mission to Gabon, the Centre also organized a day of consultation on press freedom and the right to information in which 50 Gabonese journalists participated. The proceedings and discussions of the consultation were broadcast for three days on national TV. In Cameroon, in commemoration of World Press Freedom Day, the Centre disseminated article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to over 50 educational institutions (primary, secondary and university level), and the messages of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and others were distributed widely and reported extensively in the local media.

23. Work on discrimination featured prominently, pursuant to the High Commissioner's Plan of Action and Strategic Management Plan. In this regard, the Centre organized various activities to sensitize the subregion on the need to take steps to eliminate discrimination in its various forms. Most of the activities centred on discrimination against disabled persons, minorities, indigenous peoples and those living with or affected by HIV/AIDS. In this regard, the Centre organized a workshop in Gabon on 12 April 2007 focusing on discrimination faced by people affected by AIDS, which was attended by over 50 representatives from Government, parliament, academia, civil society, the diplomatic corps and the United Nations country team. The workshop sought to address the discrimination that sometimes faces AIDS patients in hospitals, orphans and widows, as well as stigmatization in schools and homes. The need to train caregivers, hospital personnel and others who handle AIDS patients in order to prevent widespread discriminatory practices was stressed. On 15 February 2007, the Centre organized a conference in Cameroon on "The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: for better protection against discrimination and social exclusion". Parliamentarians, ambassadors, representatives of the Government of Cameroon, representatives of the United Nations system, representatives of associations of persons with disabilities, academics and journalists attended the meeting and discussed alternatives for improving protection mechanisms for people living with disabilities. Among possible solutions, the right to education and the development of training programmes for teachers and people with disabilities, the enforcement of national

legal standards and the ratification of the new United Nations convention were mentioned.

24. The commitment to sensitize Governments and stakeholders in the region on the issue of torture remains a key pillar of the Centre's work. On 26 June 2007, the Centre, in partnership with the British Embassy in Cameroon and the non-governmental organization International Federation of ACAT (Action of Christians for the Abolition of Torture), organized a conference that coincided with the United Nations International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, during which the issue of the Government's responsibility under international human rights law was extensively discussed. Ambassadors accredited to Cameroon, heads of United Nations agencies, diplomats, NGOs, jurists, journalists and students attended the conference under the theme "Combating torture: an obligation to act". As part of the event, the Centre gave several interviews and disseminated information on radio, TV, newspapers and the Internet to sensitize decision makers, civil society and the general public about torture and to encourage Central African States that have not yet ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment to do so. The Centre's work triggered newspaper articles on torture in Cameroon and led to a broad public debate on the issue.

25. On 28 March 2007, following a request by the secretariat of the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture, the Centre visited a project in Cameroon being considered for funding. The pre-screening visit to the Centre for Rehabilitation and Abolition of Torture based in Yaoundé was carried out to assess a number of elements such as the experience of the organization and its staff in the rehabilitation of victims of torture, the compatibility of its mandate with the activities proposed in its funding request and the existence of a fund management system, as well as the types of victims assisted. The Centre was able to carry out this assessment and reported back to the Fund the information sought.

26. The Centre carried out a number of activities aimed at promoting the rights of women and sensitizing people in the region about gender issues, pursuant to its new strategy. In this regard, the Centre organized two regional training of trainers courses in Gabon focusing on human rights and gender. The first of these took place from 15 to 19 April 2007, involving a dozen NGO workers selected by the Centre from Cameroon, the Republic of the Congo, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea. The second phase of this training took place from 12 to 17 June 2007. A third phase of this programme has been planned for the latter part of 2007, after which participants will be provided with small grants to start delivering training to future trainers in their respective countries. The training has allowed the trainers to function as a support network of Central Africa gender specialists and to develop a larger group of gender trainers and experts in Central Africa. The Centre was also at the forefront of the commemoration of International Women's Day on 8 March 2007.

27. The Centre also implemented activities that sought to promote and underline the importance of economic, social and cultural rights, particularly given the glaring discrepancy between the natural wealth of the subregion and the economic status of the majority of the population. The issue of poverty thus formed an important part of the Centre's sensitization programmes. On 11 December 2006, in commemoration of Human Rights Day, the Centre organized an official ceremony, followed by a week of activities during which more than 1,000 people were

informed at conferences and by media coverage on topics such as "Human rights, gender and poverty", "Human rights and rural poverty" and "Governance and the poverty reduction strategy". The Centre has raised awareness about other social and economic rights during the year, such as the right to health and labour rights.

C. Activities related to democracy and rule of law

1. Electoral processes

28. The Centre provided assistance and organized consultations in the context of country needs assessments and in further consolidation of the democratic process in Cameroon and other countries, particularly as concerns voter education and mechanisms of election observation, which were strengthened during the period under review. On 12 April 2007, a national consultation with civil society on elections was organized by the Centre in Yaoundé. Over 20 NGOs benefited from the expertise of the Centre on the role of elections in a democracy, the incorporation of human rights norms in national electoral programmes, the role of electoral commissions, and the strategies that should be adopted by members of civil society in the subregion in order to ensure peaceful, free and fair elections. The meeting also discussed the recent electoral law adopted by the parliament of Cameroon. Members of civil society who attended this consultation requested more institutionalized support from the Centre on the issue of elections and pledged to work in collaboration with the Centre to ensure widespread public sensitization to the mechanics of elections and to help train selected stakeholders.

29. On 17 July, the Centre hosted a training of trainers organized by the National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms for the observers of the legislative and municipal elections. The training seminar brought together 20 participants from the 10 provinces of Cameroon as well as two facilitators from the National Elections Observatory. The participants were trained in the objectives and methodology of election observation, the institutional and judicial framework and principles of observation, as well as how to conduct the observation with an emphasis on vigilance, transparency and integrity.

30. The theme of elections also featured in subregional meetings. As part of the experts and ministerial meetings held at the thirteenth meeting of the ECCAS Heads of State and Government, the Centre was instrumental in helping the subregional body to develop the following recommendations on elections:

- Adoption of the declaration on support to electoral processes in ECCAS member States
- Creation of the ECCAS electoral support unit
- Adoption of the ECCAS electoral observers guide
- Decision-making on electoral observation missions in ECCAS member States upon request

31. On 25 April 2007 the Centre organized a discussion session on human rights and democracy for about 50 students of the influential International Relations Institute of Cameroon. The session focused mainly on the link between human rights and democracy and was aimed at providing members of the Human Rights Club (human rights association) of the Institute with the knowledge necessary to

sensitize their fellow students on these values, especially during the 2007 election year in Cameroon when the issue of participation in elections is an important one for young people. The students expressed their appreciation to the Centre for this outreach and hoped that such discussions would be held more frequently in the future in order to sensitize the general public on human rights and democracy.

32. On 2 May 2007, at the request of local interlocutors, the Centre organized a conference-debate at the Advanced School of Mass Communication in Yaoundé on "The role of the press in the pre-electoral period". One hundred participants attended the conference, mostly faculty of the school, resource persons from the Centre, students and journalists. During the conference both the Director and the Regional Adviser on Democracy addressed issues related to journalistic ethics and deontology, focusing on the responsibility of journalists with regard to the information they convey during the sensitive electoral period. This event focused on the Cameroonian parliamentary and municipal elections which were due to be held on 22 July 2007. Considerable media publicity was generated by the holding of this conference, thus ensuring widespread dissemination of the knowledge transmitted by the Centre on the issue.

2. Transitional justice

33. The Centre's leadership on the issue of transitional justice was reinforced by the holding of a major conference, the first of its kind, which took place in Yaoundé from 4 to 6 December 2006 and was attended by over 70 people from more than 20 countries in the Francophone world. The conference was organized in collaboration with the International Centre for Transitional Justice, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of France and the Federal Department for Foreign Affairs of Switzerland under the theme: "Transitional justice in the Francophone world: current status". The participants and resource persons at this Conference included notable experts on the subject and the conference resulted in widespread sensitization of people in the subregion on the complex concepts of transitional justice and the options available for countries emerging from conflict and authoritarianism. A report of the conference was published in June 2007 by the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland.

34. Following a request by participants from the Central African region who attended the December 2006 conference on transitional justice, the Centre, with support from OHCHR headquarters in Geneva, organized a training of trainers workshop in Yaoundé from 11 to 13 June 2007. During this session, 16 human rights workers from eight countries of the Central African subregion were provided with focused, in-depth training on key transitional justice issues and concepts, with the aim of creating a trained pool of experts who can be called upon to provide support for Governments, NGOs and other stakeholders grappling with transitional justice issues. The workshop ended with a decision to organize a second follow-up training, scheduled for the last quarter of 2007. Once fully trained, these trainers are expected to conduct an international transitional justice conference, due to take place in the subregion in 2008.

D. Advisory services and technical cooperation

35. The Centre has continued to provide technical cooperation to Governments upon request. These requests have ranged from assisting the line ministries responsible for drafting reports under international human rights treaties to assistance with training security forces in human rights compliance. For example, in early 2007, the Centre received a formal request from the Government of the Republic of the Congo requesting specific assistance with the establishment of a national human rights observatory on the rights of the child as well as reporting under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. In response to this request, the Centre plans an assessment mission to the country in the latter part of 2007.

36. Similarly, during the Centre's mission to Gabon in June 2007, the Government requested technical assistance to train penitentiary administration staff, train officials in the rights of migrant workers and sensitize stakeholders on the problem of child trafficking. Officials from the Ministry of Justice also asked the Centre to help with training judicial police and prison administrators and guards in the Convention against Torture as well as to assist the country in addressing issues of education and reinsertion of young offenders. In Cameroon, the Government has sought the expertise of the Centre in training prison staff and penitentiary personnel in human rights issues. Most recently, the Government of Equatorial Guinea has requested the Centre to undertake a mission focusing, among other issues, on training of security forces and prison administrations in the observance of the Convention against Torture.

37. To further respond to the needs and requests of the Governments in the region, a strategy of regular formal and informal consultations with ambassadors of the Central Africa subregion was also initiated. On 24 January 2007, a day-long consultation was organized at the Centre's premises in Yaoundé, attended by representatives of eight countries who contributed to the development of the Centre's strategy in identifying the main areas of concern regarding human rights and democracy issues. The meeting was useful for recording the human rights challenges faced by the different countries of the subregion and increasing the awareness of the Centre of priorities in each country. The meeting also increased Governments' confidence in and reliance on the Centre and increased awareness of issues that need to be prioritized both nationally and regionally. Informal consultations with these Government representatives have been taking place on an ongoing basis throughout the year.

38. The Centre's expertise and services have also been sought by national human rights institutions in the region and efforts are under way to respond to all such requests. National human rights institutions have benefited from this assistance, for example, in Cameroon and Gabon. In Cameroon, from 4 to 7 June 2007, the Centre was one of the key trainers and resources at a major workshop organized for the benefit of the Cameroon National Commission for Human Rights and Freedoms by the Commonwealth Secretariat. Held in Yaoundé, the workshop brought in human rights experts from other parts of the Commonwealth and focused on the need to adhere to the Paris Principles. The workshop also coincided with an orientation course for newly recruited members and staff of the Commission and provided them with the necessary knowledge base to help them handle pressing human rights issues.

39. In all its dealings with State and non-State institutions in the subregion, the Centre has endeavoured to promote awareness of international human rights treaties and to ensure that they are well understood. A number of activities have been carried out in this regard. For example, on 6 February 2007, the Centre organized a video debate which consisted of the projection of the video *The Treaty Bodies; Bringing Human Rights Home*, followed by discussions. The objective was to raise public awareness of people engaged in the protection and promotion of human rights about the work of the United Nations treaty bodies. In attendance were representatives of embassies accredited to Cameroon, civil society organizations and students. Questions on the work of treaty bodies, the role of NGOs in the submission of alternative reports and the Centre's support to civil society organizations in the submission of reports were raised by participants.

E. The work of the Centre in promoting peace and security in Central Africa

40. The Centre has continued to offer its support to efforts aimed at enhancing peace and security in the subregion. From 14 to 18 May 2007, at a summit in Sao Tome and Principe on peace and security in Central Africa to which the Centre was invited, it was decided to encourage the pursuit of effective partnership between the United Nations and ECCAS. The meeting also endorsed "The Sao Tome and Principe Initiative" relating to the creation of a legal instrument to control small arms and light weapons in Central Africa, as well as a code of conduct for security and armed forces in Central Africa. The Centre intends to attend the next meeting, planned for 3-7 September 2007 in Yaoundé.

41. In June 2007, as part of the expert and ministerial meetings of the thirteenth summit of ECCAS, the Centre assisted in developing recommendations on peace and security relating to, inter alia, ensuring effectiveness of the Central Africa Multinational Force by setting up a regional headquarters and a regional brigade as the ECCAS contribution to the African Standing Force, as well as the creation of an early warning system unit within the ECCAS machinery.

42. The Centre was invited to participate in a conference on strategy, defence, security and conflict management organized by students of the University of Yaoundé II. The conference discussed standards on the protection of women during conflicts and the implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) in Africa. Students appreciated the Centre's participation and positive feedback has been received.

F. Internship programme

43. Since 2001, the Centre has run a successful internship programme for graduate students, human rights activists and representatives of Governments, national human rights institutions and civil society organizations involved in the promotion of human rights and the rule of law in the subregion. Since September 2006, the Centre has had eight interns: two from the Central African Republic, four from Cameroon, one from Equatorial Guinea and one from Italy. All were lawyers and human rights activists with outstanding records. The Centre has changed the terms of reference and recruitment system for interns and now has internships for two months,

renewable for up to six months, to ensure the sustainability of what is acquired and that interns will continue to work, as closely as possible, in the field of human rights. This has increased proficiency in human rights and democracy as well as human rights experience in Governments and administrations of the region as well as increased the visibility of the work of the Centre.

44. The Centre continues to receive many inquiries and applications for internships from abroad, notably Canada, France, Italy and Germany. While the Centre's internship programme is primarily for nationals of ECCAS member States, consideration is given to requests from outside the subregion as a way to build partnerships and enhance cross-fertilization of ideas with centres of excellence elsewhere.

G. Information and documentation

45. The Centre's new outreach strategy, which aims at giving appropriate visibility to the Centre and its critical work, contains an elaborate public information campaign and comprehensive media engagement plan, which have been considered necessary owing in particular to the essential role of the media in educating Governments and individual citizens in the region about their rights. Throughout the year, the Centre has had regular communication with heads of media houses and individual journalists, and Centre staff have appeared on the air on a regular basis to discuss different human rights concepts and educate the public on the need for widespread sensitization on human rights and democracy issues. Another strategy of the Centre over the last year has been to host "open door days" when the Centre invites the public to its offices for conferences and consultations on themes such as human rights education in schools, youth and the right to health, press freedom, women's rights, treaty bodies, racial discrimination, the right to information, the rights of people with disabilities, discrimination, torture and other topics of particular relevance in the subregion. Other outreach activities conducted by the Centre in the last year include the commemoration of special human rights days such as International Women's Day and the International Day of Peace, a policy that has helped the Centre to assert its leadership on human rights and democracy issues in the region.

46. The Centre's visibility achieved new heights with the launching of its website on 15 March 2007 at an event that generated unprecedented media attention throughout the region and brought together personalities from Government, diplomatic, professional and civil society circles. At a ceremony in Yaoundé hosted by the Minister of Communications, Njoh Mouelle Ebenezer, and the Secretary of State in charge of penitentiary administration, Emmanuel Ngafesson Bantar, the Centre's contribution to the development of human rights and democracy in Cameroon and the subregion was publicly acknowledged and lauded. The Minister of Communications welcomed the significant impact the Centre's website could have on information, education and training and called on the public to make good use of the facilities provided by the Centre.

47. The Centre has a modestly stocked documentation facility and reference library on its premises which have been widely consulted as sources of human rights and democracy information and documentation for the public, both inside Cameroon and in the subregion. The documentation centre welcomes researchers who are

working on human rights and democracy issues, as well as university students. Since the beginning of 2007, the documentation centre has received over 1,000 visitors while the number of regular registered users has risen sharply from 17 in September 2006 to over 100 in August 2007. This is mainly due to the Centre's increasing visibility.

IV. Development of partnerships

A. Collaboration with the Economic Community of Central African States

48. In accordance with the Memorandum of Understanding signed in July 2002 between the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Secretary-General of ECCAS, the Centre continued in the year under review to provide advice and technical assistance to the ECCAS secretariat in order to create a conducive environment for the elaboration and implementation of subregional human rights initiatives.

49. From 30 May to 5 June 2007, the Centre participated in and addressed the thirteenth summit of ECCAS held in Brazzaville which was also attended by experts and ministers from the subregion. The Centre assisted in proposing recommendations on peace and security, elections, the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, the Network of Central African Parliamentarians, freedom of movement, human trafficking, especially of women and children, and the transformation being discussed of the ECCAS secretariat. The Centre was also able to determine possible areas of cooperation with this regional organization. Prior to this, on 11 April 2007, during her mission to Gabon, the Centre's Director had met with the Secretary-General of ECCAS, who invited the Centre to present its strategy during the ECCAS summit.

B. Collaboration with the diplomatic community, donors and civil society organizations

50. Numerous efforts have been made by the Centre to reach out to civil society as well as to diplomatic missions based in the region. For example, through its civil society capacity-building project, the Centre has contributed to fostering partnerships between civil society organizations and some embassies in Cameroon.

51. On 19 June 2007, the Centre participated in a forum organized by the United States Embassy on the role of NGOs in Cameroon, at which the watchdog role of NGOs was examined. Similarly, on 27 June 2007, the Centre provided training sessions at a seminar organized by the British Council to a group of Cameroonian NGOs on treaty body shadow reporting.

52. On 13 February 2007, the Director met with the European Union (EU)/Delegation of the European Commission in Cameroon to discuss phase 2 of the Programme to improve the conditions of detention and respect for human rights (PACDET) project and work on opportunities for collaboration. PACDET is an EU project aimed at improving the administration of justice and conditions in 10 prisons in Cameroon. Funded jointly by EU and the Government of Cameroon, it seeks to

improve the judiciary and penitentiary institutions through training in the use of the recently adopted Penal Code and alternative punishments, public information and outreach, assistance to the judiciary and legal advice to citizens. The project is also aimed at improving conditions of detention as regards health-care services, food, education, professional training and income-generating activities. Training of trainers for penitentiary personnel is scheduled to take place in 2008 and 2009. The situation of vulnerable groups, especially children and women in prisons, will be priorities in order to ensure their social reintegration.

53. Collaboration with the regional office of the International Organization of la Francophonie was launched, with the Centre having three meetings with this office, based in Libreville, during a mission to Gabon in June 2007. The International Organization of la Francophonie helped the Centre in the organization of some of its activities. The two are currently looking for ways to develop joint programmes since human rights are a priority for both.

C. Collaboration with United Nations agencies

54. The strong partnership between the Centre and United Nations agencies in Cameroon and in the subregion played a significant role in supporting the efforts for the promotion and protection of human rights in Central Africa. Many activities have been carried out with United Nations country team members. On 29 November 2006, the Centre, in collaboration with UNAIDS, the Ministry of Public Health of Cameroon and the United Nations thematic group on HIV/AIDS, organized a conference-debate on "Principles and measures to better protect persons affected by HIV against discrimination".

55. On 20 June 2007, during the commemoration of World Refugee Day, the Centre joined the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to defend refugee rights. The Centre was part of celebrations organized by UNHCR at which 12 groups representing the various nationalities of refugees in Cameroon put on a series of displays and exhibitions. It should be noted that a growing number of asylum-seekers in Cameroon are approaching the Centre for advice. The Centre is thus closely working with UNHCR on this and related issues.

56. On 16 June 2007, to celebrate the Day of the African Child, the Centre joined the United Nations country team to discuss the Convention on the Rights of the Child and State accountability. Discussions with representatives of civil society interested in reporting on the Convention's implementation were held.

57. On 29 May 2007, the United Nations Information Centre in Yaoundé organized a conference at which the Centre presented the efforts of OHCHR to support Member States in complying with human rights-related international obligations.

58. The Centre is actively involved in the work of the United Nations country teams in the subregion, particularly in Cameroon, taking on a rotating basis the chairmanship of the regular meetings, which provide a useful forum for sensitization and coordination of cross-cutting human rights and democracy-related issues. The Centre has used this opportunity to highlight issues of human rights mainstreaming, with a special emphasis on Action 2. The Action 2 project implemented by the Centre has two main components, including capacity-building for United Nations country team programme officers on the human rights-based approach, a survey of

the status of human rights reporting in Cameroon and an assessment of national human rights systems. Planning for the implementation of the project began in June 2007.

59. The Centre has participated in many United Nations country team meetings at which it presented the human rights perspective on various issues and increased human rights awareness and knowledge, including for programming. In addition, the Centre has taken the lead for several United Nations country team activities: World Press Freedom Day, a conference on migration, the International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers and model United Nations conferences in schools.

V. Conclusions and recommendations

60. With its new leadership, the Centre has decided to focus on human rights and democracy issues that could bring solid and sustainable results and have a rapid impact throughout the region while remaining in full compliance with the High Commissioner's Strategic Management Plan and Plan of Action. The new strategy of the Centre aims at developing concrete, effective, user-friendly systems to bridge the knowledge gap of Governments and other stakeholders in terms of treaty body reporting, human rights education and protection of human rights defenders, and to ensure that all human rights international mechanisms are ratified, incorporated into national legislation, understood and applied. The new strategy seeks to guarantee access to training and knowledge regarding human rights and democracy to the largest possible number of stakeholders. It also aims at bringing Governments, national institutions and other partners on board to become involved in the promotion and protection of human rights.

61. In 2007, the Centre has succeeded in reaching its strategic objectives through different means. The democracy programme has been restarted with a focus on supporting ECCAS and Government efforts and initiatives to build durable peace and address corruption issues in the Central African region. The Centre contributed to bridging the regional knowledge gap in terms of transitional justice and addressing issues of impunity, reparation and amnesty laws through two transitional justice seminars that have also tremendously increased the visibility of the Centre, particularly among its subregional and international partners which have since clearly indicated their interest in continuing to work with the Centre on a long-term basis. The Centre provided direct support to parliamentarians, contributed to increasing the participation of the most vulnerable and marginalized people in critical democratic processes and supported the strengthening of credible NGOs.

62. The human rights programme focused on strengthening national human rights frameworks and building the capacity of Government ministries with human rights mandates, national human rights institutions, key actors and the general public, particularly in addressing issues of impunity, discrimination and poverty. The Centre expanded its partnership with United Nations country teams through training in using the human rights-based approach, advising and advocating for their support in enhancing treaty body reporting and strengthening reliable and independent national human rights institutions, as well as a programme to protect the most vulnerable and marginalized groups of the subregion.

63. The General Assembly, in its resolution 61/158, requested the Secretary-General and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights "to provide additional funds and human resources within the existing Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to enable the Centre to respond positively and effectively to the growing needs in the promotion and protection of human rights and in developing a culture of democracy and the rule of law in the Central African subregion". Efforts need to be made to ensure the full implementation of this resolution. This will enable the Centre to deliver on all its planned work and ensure its continued legitimacy and leadership on human rights and democracy issues in the region.